

“That Silly Staircase Between Us”: Class Repression in *Double Indemnity*

The concurrent appearance of film noir with the general disillusionment with the American “meritocracy” has consequently caused many to read the style as a critique of war and post-war American society. A great deal of previous scholarship has explored the ways in which the noir style attacked the promise of solidarity among all Americans during the war and subsequent victory as empty. Critics argue that these films challenged the rising corporatocracy that threatened to disenfranchise the working- and middle-classes and even push them towards criminality.¹ However, while Noir does offer a critique of the corporate class in relation to the working class in a certain sense, these films also operate as a site of containment where class anxieties are alleviated through their “othering.” This occurs partially through the establishment of an underclass based on race and ethnicity, which grants the white working- and middle-classes a permanent middle-class status in relation to them, and partially through the linking of class ambitions with feminine desire.

While much scholarship explores the ways in which the woman in film noir becomes a screen for enacting male anxieties, typically she is read as a site for transferring gender concerns regarding emasculation and *sexual* desire. She becomes a manifestation of the male’s anxieties concerning the increase of women in the work force and their growing sexual independence. However, the femme fatale figure in these films also becomes a means of expressing male anxieties concerning class mobility and the removal of worker autonomy from labor. Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity* (1944), considered by many as the quintessential noir film containing the quintessential femme fatale in Barbara Stanwyk’s portrayal of Phyllis Dietrichson, serves as an exemplary case

of how the noir film illustrates the repression of class anxieties and ambitions and create a means of containment for the American worker coping with the destruction of his belief in America as a post-class society.

Of course, even before World War II the Great Depression had greatly damaged the myth of America as a post-class society. As Mike Chopra-Gant states, “the hardships of life for many Americans during the great depression widened the cracks in this vision of America as an egalitarian, classless society” (28-29). Contributing further to this disillusionment, the years during and immediately following World War II saw the rise of the corporation in stature and power, aided in large part by government programs designed to boost production for the war. While government aid was issued as a means of galvanizing the home front for the war effort, it exacerbated the feeling that workers were left out of the equation. According to Dennis Broe, during the war “alongside the feelings of contributing to a collective struggle went the growing feeling that the sacrifices were all going one way: workers were sacrificing, and corporations were profiting . . . they watched business profits rise while wages remained stagnant” (3, 31). The government encouraged labor to eliminate wartime striking and allowed companies to freeze wages in the name of national sacrifice (Broe 3). After the war labor would become even weaker as unions became synonymous with communism. With government approval, the corporation gained more and more power within American society and contributed to the feeling of the working-class becoming more and more oppressed.

Despite this growing disillusionment, or perhaps because of it, most films during this time period continued to uphold the myth of “The American Dream,” extolling the belief that “hard work, determination and resilience . . . will enable [the working man] to

transcend his prior class position and allow him to take his place within the new middle class” (Chopra-Gant 35). Chopra-Gant’s *Hollywood Genres and Postwar America* explores how popular films of the era, such as *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), reinforce “the mythical possibility of a universal middle-class—effectively a classless society” (33). He argues that while film noir has somehow become representative of film during this era, and has been used by scholars to illustrate American disaffection with its own myths of social mobility and gender relations, the vast majority of popular films upheld rather than critiqued these myths.

Film noir has been recognized by many as a break with the myths of the American way of life, and as an attempt to expose how these ideals have failed the working- and middle-classes. The dark, gritty style and the existential themes of the genre are seen as a critique of the American way of life. Whereas Chopra-Gant and other critics see the noir style as participating in an entirely different tradition from popular cinema of the same era, I argue that noir can best be understood as also attempting to ignore or repress class anxieties, but in a different way from other films of the era. Whereas most films from the period frequently ignored the concept of class in order to reinscribe the ideals of Jeffersonian Democracy for the audience, film noir repressed class anxieties by transferring these onto racial, ethnic and gendered (i.e. the femme fatale) others. Rather than critiquing the myths of the classless society, noir instead redrew the boundaries of class to repress these social anxieties and ultimately provided an avenue for rewriting these myths through the figure of the detective, himself a post-class figure.

The attempt to repress class anxieties appears throughout *Double Indemnity*. The Pacific All-Risk Insurance Company, where Walter Neff works, illustrates the fear of the corporatization of the middle-class work place. The main floor of the office is lined with row after row of desks that look identical to one another, and during the day the space is filled with workers dressed in an identical middle-class bourgeois style. In his analysis of the film James Naremore writes, “Walter is little more than a cog in a bureaucracy” (87).² For Neff—who worked his way up from a vacuum salesman—and those like him, rising into the middle-class no longer assures the individual autonomy it once did, but instead results in servitude to a rising corporate class. Despite presumably making more money than when he sold vacuums, Neff is still ultimately responsible to his boss, Edward Norton, Jr. When Dietrichson is killed and the insurance company discovers they must pay, Norton is upset that Neff sold the coverage to Dietrichson and admonishes him by saying “A fine piece of salesmanship that was, Mr. Neff” (*Double*). Here Neff is not only criticized by his boss, but is criticized for doing his job *too well*. This reaction from Norton emphasizes the working- and middle-classes’ fears of becoming enslaved to a capricious corporate class that performs no work but instead controls the actions of those beneath them. In short, Neff’s marginal occupational rise from vacuum salesman to insurance salesman has not granted him independence.

Norton’s office and personal appearance further establish him as a means of ridiculing the corporate class. He himself comments on the class anxieties between himself and his workers by complaining, “There’s a widespread feeling that just because a man has a large office . . . he must be an idiot” (*Double*). The first (and only) encounter with Norton in the film occurs in his large office, which is decorated with a large ornate

desk and equally extravagant chairs. Norton himself is clearly the most well dressed man in the film and, as described in Chandler's script, is "very well groomed, rather pompous in manner" (71). Norton's luxurious surroundings suggest that while the corporate class may have the appearance of grandeur, there is nothing beneath the surface. In other words, they arrive at their positions not through merit, but rather through belonging to the corporate class to begin with, suggesting a break with the traditional concept of America as a meritocracy.

Norton's name marks him as rising through the ranks based on class rather than merit. Because of the "Jr." after his name, Norton is implicitly marked as inheriting his status as leader not through merit, but through his position as son to the founder. This status is further marked in his discussion with Keyes; when he tells the claims manager "I was raised in the insurance business," Keyes wryly responds, "Yeah, in the front office." This exchange not only emphasizes that Norton does not come to his job through personal merit, but also suggests that he, as a member of the corporate class, is separated from the "work" of the insurance business.

Norton's lack of competence in the business he runs is driven home when he suggests that Dietrichson's death was a case of suicide. While initially pleased with himself for discovering an angle that Keyes failed to find, the claims manager quickly embarrasses him and reinforces his superior knowledge in the insurance business:

Come now, you've never read an actuarial table in your life, have you? Why they've got ten volumes on suicide alone. Suicide by race, by color, by occupation, by sex, by seasons of the year, by time of day. Suicide, how committed: by poison, by firearms, by drowning, by leaps. Suicide by poison,

subdivided by types of poison, such as corrosive, irritant, systemic, gaseous, narcotic, alkaloid, protein, and so forth; suicide by leaps, subdivided by leaps from high places, under the wheels of trains, under the wheels of trucks, under the feet of horses, from steamboats. But, Mr. Norton, of all the cases on record, there's not one single case of suicide by leap from the rear end of a moving train. And you know how fast that train was going at the point where the body was found? Fifteen miles an hour. Now how can anybody jump off a slow-moving train like that with any kind of expectation that he would kill himself? No. No soap, Mr. Norton.

This litany drives home that Keyes, the true “worker” in the insurance company, fully understands the business in a way that Norton, a member of the corporate class, simply cannot. It is Keyes and not Norton who should run the insurance company, emphasizing the anxiety of workers forced into subordinate positions based not on merit, but on class.

While the interactions between Keyes and Norton bring the issues of class somewhat to the forefront,³ the film mostly attempts to mask and even suppress class conflict. On a larger scale, the film illustrates how American culture attempts to make the working classes invisible. The first time we see the interior of the Pacific All-Risk Insurance Company, a wounded Neff enters the building late at night to record his confession. The shot shows Neff positioned above the floor of the darkened office as janitorial staff clean the floor below. The staging here clearly marks Neff, a middle-class salesman, as a class above the workers below. Additionally, the workers, with the exception of the man who greets Neff upon entering the building, are mostly nondescript and unidentifiable. They work in the background, only in the dark, during the night,

obscuring them from the normal view of the company's workers. Later when we see this same floor, it is filled with the bourgeois middle class workers mentioned above. The fact that this same space is occupied by both classes of workers illustrates the anxieties felt by the middle class that corporatization would eventually lower their status; in some ways, Neff's status has suffered just such a fall at this point. It is fitting that the only time Neff interacts with these lower class workers is now, after his own attempts to rise in class have failed.

Workers are similarly relegated to the background during the scenes in Jerry's Market. As Erik Dussere points out in "Out of the Past, Into the Supermarket: Consuming Film Noir," supermarkets during this era possessed "an aura of pragmatism and democracy . . . the marketing of affordable food and sundries to the masses" (19). In other words, the supermarket was coded as a working-class zone, a lower-end site of mass consumption. That the plot to kill Dietrichson unfolds at this site emphasizes the anxieties concerning the precariousness of class. While Neff and Phyllis discuss their plans workers continuously restock the shelves and intrude upon the cinematic space of the couple in order to do their work. While of course the presence and interruptions of the workers adds to a sense of suspense over whether or not the couple will be discovered, the combination of the location and the extras contributes to the sense that Neff and Phyllis, despite their middle-class affectations, are really working-class themselves. After all, he used to sell vacuum cleaners door-to-door, and is essentially doing the same thing now, whereas she killed Dietrichson's first wife so that she could marry him because she "wanted a home" (*Double*). Just as the pair plot to rise in social

class, the film associates them with a possible fall in stature, illustrating the anxiety of the fragility of status for the middle-class in America.

Double Indemnity could be seen as a critique of class anxieties and the ways in which America attempts to repress class through the myth of a classless society.

However, the film itself is also engaged in an attempt to repress these same anxieties and ameliorate concerns held by bourgeois culture. While the film certainly exposes class relations, it stops short of critiquing them and instead participates in a myth creation project of its own. Specifically, the film reaffirms the position of the working- and middle-classes in a culture that was growing increasingly insecure about their stability.

Fears of the oppression of the working- and middle-classes are in some ways disarmed through the racial and ethnic "othering" of the working-classes shown in the film. With very few exceptions, workers are portrayed as African-American. These include the porter on the train and the "colored woman" (who is never shown in the film) who cleans Neff's apartment twice a week (*Double*). Perhaps the most important of these workers is Charlie, the garage attendant who works at Neff's building and provides him with his alibi for the night of the murder. In this case, Charlie is separated from those who live in the building not just by race and class, but also by his working space, which places him in the invisible zone of the garage where he is predominately out of sight of the bourgeois tenants. In these scenes, Neff's social class is secured as superior to Charlie's and thus alleviates some of the anxieties present concerning class mobility. This plays into working and middle class whites' fears of losing social status in that it establishes a permanent underclass based upon race, and thus assures them of at least some class superiority.

Ethnicity is treated in a similar way in the film. The man Keyes exposes for committing arson in order to collect on an insurance claim is not only clearly portrayed as working class based on his dress, but also speaks with a thick accent marking him as ethnically other and, more specifically, as an immigrant. When the man leaves the office after confessing, Keyes remarks to Neff, “Who would sell insurance to a mug like that?” This marks the man as *visibly* working class, as well as potentially criminal, based upon not only his appearance, but also his ethnicity.

Nino Zachetti, the boyfriend of Lola Dietrichson, is the primary source of the ethnic othering of the working-class and linking it with criminality. Nino’s name clearly marks him as ethnically other and what the viewer learns about his past links him with the working class. Lola tells Neff that Zachetti was forced to work as an usher at a movie theater to pay for college classes, but eventually dropped out of college and was fired from his job. Not only is Zachetti marked in this way as lower in class from those in the rest of the film, but he also symbolizes the possibility of a drop in class status. Byron Barr’s portrayal of the character as a quasi-gangster street tough further links the working-class with ethnic difference and criminality, and emphasizes the difference between the working-class immigrant and the working-class Anglo white. Both race and ethnicity function as a means of suppressing class anxieties in that they both displace class oppression. The presence of these working class minorities reinforces the class status of the white working-class and serves to repress their anxieties by transferring them onto the “other”; it is not they who are oppressed by a class hierarchy, but an ‘other’ who is marked as racially or ethnically different, and is often linked with criminality.

Even more so than the ethnic and racial minorities within the film, Phyllis serves as a screen upon which these concerns over social position are projected in order to purge them. Of course, as noted earlier, a great deal of scholarship has argued that the figure of the femme fatale serves as a screen for the male protagonist's anxieties. Frank Krutnik writes, "the woman serves to activate [male anxieties] rather than actually cause" them (99). The woman in this way represents the thing within the male protagonist which he cannot bring himself to confront. Traditionally, the femme fatale is read as symbolizing a *sexual* anxiety present within the masculine subject, but I would argue that this can also be read as representing an anxiety of *class*.

While much has been written on Phyllis as a projection of Neff's sexual desires,⁴ most reviews written at the time of the film's release commented upon the lack of sexual chemistry in the couple's relationship. James Agee wrote in *The Nation*, "It is proper enough . . . that her affair with MacMurray should essentially be as sexless as it is loveless," but Wilder "has neglected to bring to life the sort of freezing rage of excitations which such a woman presumably inspires" (445). Similarly, Manny Farber of *The New Republic* commented that "[t]he love affair seems too slight to drive the man into murder and to give the picture the great sense of passion and evil it needs" (103). I would agree with these reviews that Stanwyck's and MacMurray's love affair seems devoid of affect, and I would go further in suggesting that neither of the two seems any more excited about the prospect of collecting the \$100,000 from the insurance company. While many contemporary reviewers saw this as a flaw in the film, it begins to make sense if Phyllis is seen as a screen upon which Neff projects his own class ambitions, thus making the affair an attempt to act out a repressed desire for class mobility.

Phyllis's own narrative makes her the perfect source upon whom Neff may transfer his own class issues. As mentioned above, she is accused of killing Dietrichson's first wife in order to marry him, and it seems clear that a move in class position was the only motivation for her marriage. This illustrates the fears associated with social class in two ways. First of all, it suggests that in order for someone from a lower class, such as Phyllis, to move up in class, a member of the upper class must be damaged in the process. Additionally, for the lower classes, it suggests that the only possibility for social mobility is through criminality. In other words, because the government and the corporate class structure have become entangled with one another, it is no longer possible to shift social position without transgression.

Woman in film noir is frequently linked with crossing class boundaries through criminality. Broe writes that film noir shows the femme fatale's "'crime' [as] the desire to be upwardly mobile" (27), but the situation is even more complicated than this. It is not so much that the woman is outside the law *because* of her desire to move up in class, but that the only way for her to move up in class is to transgress. More importantly, the issues of social mobility exhibited in the femme fatale figures are ultimately representations of the ambitions repressed by the male protagonists, thereby transforming the female into a manifestation of the male protagonist's repressed class ambitions. Because Neff should not desire to move up in social class, he instead wishes to possess the woman that he views as embodying his own desires for social mobility.

Wilder illustrates cinematically the ways in which Phyllis represents the possibility of rising in social class for Neff. When she first appears onscreen, she is positioned on a balcony at the top of a set of stairs, high above Neff. He comments

through his voice-over that he wanted to see her “without that silly staircase between us” (*Double*). She then proceeds to descend the staircase as the camera focuses on her legs walking down. Broe writes that “the symbol of a staircase, a habitual marker in film noir, is explicitly defined as what is usually disguised. It marks a passage from one class to another” (67); the staircase, in other words, becomes a physical manifestation of the possibilities of class mobility. Phyllis’s linking with a privileged position above Neff, and then moving down symbolizes her class position. She ostensibly occupies a higher-class position than the insurance salesman, but it is a status based only on criminality. This allows Neff to transfer his own ambitions for class mobility onto her; if she has moved in social status then he can do the same by possessing her.

Phyllis’s behavior as consumer further identifies her with the ability to move up in class. In his essay on *Double Indemnity* Richard Schickel mentions the ankle bracelet as “signifying lower middle-class commonness, just the sort of adornment a former nurse who has married up might favor” (41). The anklet not only identifies Phyllis as trashy and somewhat “common,” but also illustrates her pretensions to middle-class status; it is an affectation used to assume a higher-class status that is not rightfully hers. It is significant that the anklet is the first thing Neff compliments her about and that he mentions it so frequently both within the narrative arc of the story as well as in his voice-over narration. The anklet is so important for Neff precisely because it represents the class ambitions he has repressed in himself; it symbolizes the desire to appear to be the member of a higher-class than one belongs to, and this is what he finds most attractive about her.

Later he compliments her again on a marker of class, her perfume. When he asks her for its name, she responds that she doesn't know, and that she bought it while on vacation in Ensenada. Phyllis's ignorance of the perfume suggests that she does not possess the qualities of taste and refinement that one rightfully belonging to the upper classes would possess. Also, the mention of Ensenada itself signals an affectation to a higher class in that it was "a resort just over the Mexican border, which in those days featured a casino and catered to a fast crowd that was not quite the right crowd in Los Angeles" (Schickel 44). The fact that Phyllis has been to the resort further suggests that she wishes to pose as a higher class than she belongs to. More important, however, is Neff's focusing upon her markers of social status. His commenting upon the anklet, the perfume, and his desire at their first meeting to have "some of that pink wine" emphasizes the importance of class to his relationship with Phyllis (*Double*). He is drawn to her not for her sexuality, which, as mentioned earlier, is remarkably absent from Stanwyck's performance, but rather because she serves as a substitution for his class ambitions. She represents his own social desires and the possibility of moving up in class.

Possession of a woman has tended to be viewed as a marker of class for the male. Paul Arthur points out that in killing Dietrichson Neff "has exchanged identities . . . with his ostensibly more settled and affluent victim" (96); the most important aspect of this exchange is the possession of Phyllis herself. Because Phyllis is associated with not only an upper class via her marriage, but with an upward social mobility due to her own past, possessing her symbolizes the possibility of an increase in class status for Neff. As such,

he never confronts his own class ambitions and instead represses them through his desire for Phyllis.

This repressed social anxiety is ultimately released in the film through the character of Keyes who offers a return to some semblance of a classless society. The detective character in film noir frequently serves as a post-class figure capable of freely passing between class lines. Through this character's ease of traversing these lines, he exposes them as ultimately arbitrary and suggests that America can return to a classless state through the removal of class ambitions.⁵

Barton Keyes is clearly marked as working-class in the film. He smokes "cheap cigars" that are "two for a quarter," and wears no suit jacket throughout most of the film (*Double*). Edward G. Robinson's performance emphasizes Keyes's complete lack of class affectation and the desire for social mobility. When he enters Norton's office without a jacket he asks Keyes, "Do you find this an uncomfortably warm day?" to which Keyes responds, "Sorry, I didn't know this was formal" and leaves his office promising, "Next time I'll wear a tuxedo" (*Double*). Keyes's contempt for Norton's upper class pretensions contrasts directly with Neff's focusing upon Phyllis's markers of class status. Keyes is a worker who prides himself in excelling at his job and seems to hold those who view themselves as part of the corporate class structure in contempt. Whereas Norton as a representative of the corporate classes is concerned with appearances in order to solidify his position, and Neff is preoccupied with Phyllis's accoutrements to class because they represent the possibility for a rise in social class himself, Keyes appears uninterested and too busy to adopt affectations of class. In this way he almost appears as though he could serve as the embodiment of the perfect manifestation of the working-

class ethic to do ones job and not concern oneself with rise in social position. However, Keyes refuses to defer authority to those in classes above him, such as Norton, and easily communicates with those beneath him in class, such as the immigrant he forces to confess to fraud. The ease with which Keyes maneuvers between class lines suggests that he is not merely adhering to a working-class ethic, but rather refuses to recognize class distinctions at all.

In some ways Keyes represents the ultimate repression of the working- and middle-class ambition to rise in social stature, in that he replaces them with the meticulous performance of his work, which is of course a conservative ideal for the labor movement to uphold. The casting of Edward G. Robinson in this role functions as a shorthand for this repression. Known throughout the '30s for playing mostly working-class gangsters who went from rags to riches, Robinson in many ways symbolized the same destructive tendencies created by class ambitions that are seen in Neff. In *Double Indemnity*, however, he displays no class ambitions whatsoever. This is not to suggest that Keyes is not class conscious; indeed, his interactions with Norton show that he is clearly conscious of both his own class and that of others. However, he has decided to live outside of the class hierarchy, in essence becoming a post-class figure and providing a model for how to exist in an America where the myths of classlessness have been destroyed. Early in the film Keyes offers Neff the opportunity to forget his class ambitions by joining his team of investigators. Essentially, Neff would become a detective like Keyes and a post-class figure as well; Neff of course refuses because of a pay cut attached to the job offer, but also because he is still fixated upon class ambitions which he has transferred onto Phyllis.

In the end, when Neff finally forsakes his own ambitions, he must first kill Phyllis as she has become associated with them. Through the destruction of Phyllis he frees himself from the class structure; symbolically, his indoctrination as a post-class figure occurs in his facilitating the reconciliation of the working-class Zachetti with the upper-class Lola Dietrichson. This move shows not only a renunciation of his own class ambitions, since it effectively ends his own courtship with Lola, but also shows that in setting up these two he has somehow managed to see beyond class. Neff then returns to the insurance company's offices, where, as Schickel notes, he "dies in the right arms [Keyes's], though, within the relationship he should not have spurned" (64). But Keyes is not the perfect relationship because of a renunciation of the feminine, as Schickel suggests, but because of the renunciation of class.

Double Indemnity, and perhaps film noir in general, serves not simply as a critique of American society, but also as a means of containment. Aligning the lower classes with ethnic and racial "others" grants the white male working- and middle-class subject a higher class status that cannot be removed regardless of his economic instability or the menial nature of his job. By associating the desire for the rise in social status with feminine criminality, the film suggests that those who attempt to ascend to a higher class ultimately transgress the social order, and should instead, like Keyes and other detective figures, forsake the notion of class and return to the roots of the mythical post-class America.

Notes

1. There are numerous examples of this traditional view of the noir film. Paul Schrader argues that Noir exhibited an “antagonism [that] turns with a new viciousness toward the American society itself” (55), and that the Noir film “attacked and interpreted its sociological conditions” (63). In *Film Noir* Andrew Spicer echoes this sentiment, arguing that Noir formed “a disruptive component of an American cinema that had habitually sought to reassure and comfort its audience” (2). He later goes on to add that “In attempting to explain the eruption of film noir’s dark, cynical and often pessimistic stories into the sunlit pastures of Hollywood’s characteristically optimistic and affirmative cinema, film historians have often resorted to the metaphor of the ‘dark mirror’” (19).

2. Naremore argues that this point concerning bureaucratization would have been further emphasized through the inclusion of the deleted gas chamber sequence, where the viewer would have watched Neff’s execution. He writes that Wilder creates a “grimly sardonic vision of a ‘Taylorized’ or assembly-line America, culminating in the gas chamber sequence” (Naremore 83), presumably by illustrating how the machine of the American corporate system has mechanized even the machinery of death.

3. As well as suggesting an audience’s desire to witness the onscreen humiliation of a member of the corporate class at the hands of one of his workers.

4. William Jeffrey makes the argument that Neff is transferring his own oedipal desires onto Phyllis and thus using and manipulating *her*. He states, “Neff is the instigator, plotter, and murderer [who] has used projective identification to impose his

fervor onto Phyllis” (707). In this way, Phyllis is not the catalyst for murder, but a screen upon which Neff enacts his own fantasy.

5. Perhaps the most obvious example being Philip Marlowe, who, while ostensibly working-class, moves freely across class lines to solve his cases. He interacts freely with the classes beneath and above him, making references to both high- and popular-culture without displaying a particular affinity for either, setting him up as the ideal post-class hero.

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